DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 286 556 JC 870 427

TITLE	Student Assessment: Social Science. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges, Los Angeles, Calif.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Aug 84
CONTRACT	400-83-0030
NOTE	3p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Community Colleges; Educational Testing; History; *Knowledge Level; Political Science; *Social Sciences; Sociology; Two Year Colleges; *Two Year College Students
IDENTIFIERS	*Center for the Study of Community Colleges CA; ERIC Digests; *General Academic Assessment

ABSTRACT

In an effort to assess community college students' knowledge of the liberal arts, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges developed and field tested a student survey and General Academic Assessment (GAA) instrument. The GAA was completed by a sample of 8,024 students at four large, urban community college districts. The scores were cross tabulated by selected student characteristic variables (e.g., age, ethnicity, native language, and reason for attending college) and selected educational background variables (e.g., the number of college units already completed by the student, and the number of social science courses the student had taken prior to the GAA test). The social science portions of the GAA focused on knowledge of society, government, and history. On these sections, older students scored higher than younger students. A comparison of the scores of students who had completed less than 15 college units with the scores of students who had completed 60 or more units indicated that there were no great differences among ethnic groups in the rate of gain in social sciences. The native language of the student appeared to be a significant factor in the social science section of the GAA, with native English speakers scoring 5.17 compared to 4.12 for non-Native English speakers. Those students attending college to satisfy a personal interest scored higher than those intending to transfer or receiving occupational training. There appeared to be a positive correlation between the number of semester hours completed and scores on the social science section of the GAA. (EJV)

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ERIC DIGEST

August 1984

STUDENT ASSESSMENT - SOCIAL SCIENCE

In an effort to assess community college students' knowledge of the liberal arts, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges developed and field-tested a student survey and general academic assessment. This General Academic Assessment (GAA) has representative numbers of items in the humanities, sciences, social sciences, mathematics, and English usage. In addition, it contains such background items about the students as age, the number of college credits earned, educational and occupational aspirations, self-assessment of their skills, and the number of liberal-arts courses taken.

During 1983 and 1984, a sample of 8,824 students at four large urban community college districts (Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami-Dade, and St. Louis) completed the GAA instrument. The sample was obtained by taking every twentieth eligible class section in each of the districts' schedule of classes. Only sections with academic transfer-credits were eligible; students taking remedial classes, vocational-technical classes, adult education, or community services courses exclusively were not included.

This ERIC digest examines how well the students did on the social science portion of the GAA. The nature of the social science test items is first discussed, followed by a series of tables that detail scores by ethnicity, age, and educational background.

Test items in the social section of the GAA assess student knowledge of society, government and history. Examples are provided below:

Of the following, a primitive society with little economic specialization is most likely to have:

(A) many social reformers
(B) a democratic government
(C) a set of well understood social mores
(D) a high degree of social mobility
(E) a high incidence of mental maladjustment

The Supreme Court decides its cases on the bases of:

(A) simple majority
(B) two-thirds majority
(C) three-fourths majority
(D) unanimous decision

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Some items were provided by the National Assessment of Educational Progress and others were made available on loan by the Educational Testing Service. Selection was made by a panel of staff members from community colleges in Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, Phoenix, and St. Louis. A total of 71 items in social sciences was used on the five forms of the GAA. Scores on the social science section were aggregated and converted to ten-point scale scores.

In the following tables, the GAA scores are cross tabulated by selected Student Characteristic variables and selected Educational background variables. Student characteristics encompass age, ethnicity, native language, and reason for attending college; Educational background variables include the number of college units already completed by the student, and the number of social science courses that the student has taken prior to the GAA test. Each table shows, in rank order, the mean social science score on a scale of 1 to 10.

I. GAA Scores Cross Tabulated by Student Characteristics

A. Mean Scores by Student Age

In general, older students scored higher than younger students.

Age	Mean	Number
Over 50	6.19	176
41 - 50	5.33	386
31 - 40	5.31	896
21 - 30	4.86	3,245
20 or less	4.80	3,215
Entire Population	4.93	7,838

B. Mean Scores by Ethnic Group

Data comparing the scores of students who had completed 0-14 college units with the scores of students who had completed 60 or more units indicate that there are no great differences among ethnic groups in the rate of gain in social sciences. Although beginning Black students scored lower than beginning Hispanics, the rate of gain for Black students is higher than that for Hispanics.

Ethnic Group	Mean	N	Mean	N	Differential
	0-14 Units		60 or more units		
Asian	3.65	166	4.36	138	.71
Black	4.01	550	4.88	278	.87
Hispanic	4.58	429	4.89	197	.31
White	5.25	936	6.56	567	1.31
Other	4.51	79	4.81	52	.30

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C. Mean Scores by Whether or not English is the Native Language

The native language of the student appears to be a significant factor in the social science section of the GAA. Native English speakers scored 5.17 while those whose native language is not English scored 4.12.

D. Mean Scores by Reason for Attending College

Students attend community colleges for a variety of reasons. Those attending to satisfy a personal interest scored higher than those intending to transfer or receiving occupational training.

Reason for Attending	Mean	Number
Personal Interest	5.32	568
Transfer	4.95	4,453
Advance in Occupation	4.86	702
Enter Occupation	4.77	2,139
Entire Population	4.92	7,862

E. Mean Scores by Self-Rating of Ability to Understand Political Ideologies

Students taking the GAA were asked to rate their ability to understand different political ideologies as compared to other students in their college. Those who rated themselves highly also scored high on the social science section of the GAA.

Rating	Mean	Number
Excellent	5.82	1,048
Good	5.17	3,014
Fair	4.60	2,975
Poor	4.22	887
Entire Population	4.93	7,924

II. GAA Scores Cross Tabulated by Educational Background

A. Mean Scores by Number of Completed College Units

There appears to be a positive correlation between the number of semester hours completed and scores on the social science section of the GAA.

Number of Units Completed	Mean	Number
60 or more	5.51	1,265
45 - 59	5.13	1,055
30 - 44	4.88	1,396
15 - 29	4.80	1,635
0 - 14	4.64	2,213
Entire Population	4.94	7,564

B. Mean Scores by Number of Social Science Course Taken

When all student populations are merged, there appears a positive correlation between the number of social science courses taken and scores on the social science section of the GAA. Data comparing ethnic groups indicate Asians had the highest rate of gain.

Ethnic Group	Mean No Courses	N	Mean 3 or More Courses	N	Differential
All Students	4.60	2,370	5.65	1,828	1.05
Asian	3.65	253	4.80	132	1.15
Black	4.04	566	5.03	411	.99
Hispanic	4.42	438	5.16	300	.74
White	5.32	980	6.35	854	1.03
Other	4.35	86	5.15	81	.80

The GAA is meant to assess students' knowledge of the liberal arts in community colleges. The social science section, as well as the others, was designed specifically to assess the learning of cohorts of students, not individual students. The data from the GAA will be used as a tool to aid in program planning, curricular modifications, and to gauge institutional outcomes. More information about the GAA may be obtained from:

Center for the Study of Community Colleges
Research Director: Florence B. Brawer
1047 Gayley Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90024

Riley, Michelle. The Community College General Academic Assessment: Los Angeles District, 1983. Los Angeles: Center for the Study of Community Colleges, 1984. ED number not yet assigned.

Riley, Michelle. The Community College General Academic Assessment: Miami-Dade Community College District, 1983. Los Angeles: Center for the Study of Community Colleges, 1984. ED number not yet assigned.

ERIC Digests examining other sections of the GAA are available from the ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges; 8118 Math Sciences Building; UCLA; Los Angeles, California 90024.

ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges NOV 06 1987